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# To cut gridlock, drivers should pay for fast lane, new study says

'Congestion pricing' works elsewhere and is needed here, report says



Inbound traffic on the Kennedy creeps from Montrose Avenue toward the Loop. "The public understands that unpredictable traffic conditions make everyday driving like a game of roulette," said Joseph Schwieterman, an urban transportation expert at DePaul University. "Congestion pricing is about the only weapon we have." (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune / July 9, 2010)



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By Richard Wronski, Tribune reporter 10:30 a.m. CDT, July 13, 2010







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Wom down by a grinding commute from his home in Joliet to **John Marshall** Law School in downtown **Chicago**, aspiring attorney Mario Reed says he would gladly shell out a chunk of his future retainers for less congestion on the expressways.

"There's nothing more frustrating than dealing with traffic," says Reed, 28. "Whatever that cost would be, I would be happy to pay. It would make the quality of my life much better."

Already plagued by the nation's third-worst traffic congestion with little hope of building a way out of gridlock, Chicago-area motorists need to seriously consider whether they're willing to pay more to avoid traffic jams, transportation experts say.

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A new federally funded study by the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Illinois Tollway suggests that it's time for Chicago to embrace the concept known as "congestion pricing."

The strategy imposes the supply-and-demand model on traffic conditions. Expressway motorists pay a fee – or a premium toll on the tollway — to use a particular lane or lanes during peak-demand periods. The fee would vary, depending on traffic — maybe about \$5.39 for Reed's commute on the inbound Stevenson — and lane usage would be "managed" to guarantee steady traffic flow.

"The public understands that unpredictable traffic conditions make everyday driving like a game of roulette," said Joseph Schwieterman, an urban transportation expert at **DePaul University**. "Congestion pricing is about the only weapon we have in our arsenal to encourage more efficient use of our expressways [and tollways]."

Proponents say the strategy creates incentives to travel during less-crowded times, encourages carpooling and transit use, and cuts wasted time and money from motorists stuck in traffic. Congestion-priced lanes also have been shown to improve traffic flow in adjacent lanes, backers say.

The tollway and the planning council applied for a federal grant in 2007 to fund the study of congestion pricing. The council supports the concept, while the tollway hasn't taken a position.

The study did not provide a timeline for how long it would take to implement such a plan in the Chicago area if it were approved.

After evaluating the tollways and expressways in the seven-county region, officials targeted three routes for the study: the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55) from I-355 to downtown Chicago; the **Jane Addams** Tollway (I-90) from I-290/Illinois Highway 53 to **Elgin**; and the reversible lanes on the Kennedy Expressway (I-90/94).

By converting the Kennedy's reversible lanes into congestion-priced lanes, the state would ask drivers to pay a variable toll depending on traffic and time of day, while being assured of free-flowing traffic, even in rush hour, according to the study.

"It's not a bad idea," said Steve Helpem, 66, a **Glencoe** resident who drives the Kennedy regularly to Lincoln Park. "If you pay extra, you'd get there faster. The question is, how much?"

Maybe about \$2.19 per inbound ride, the study suggests. That's just an estimate, however, based on models in other cities.

Similar express lanes and high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes are the most common examples of congestion pricing in the United States, and are in use or being considered in 22 states.

In Minneapolis, where congestion pricing on the I-394 corridor was introduced in 2005, tolls are adjusted



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hourly based on the level of congestion. Drivers pay from \$1 to \$4 during rush hour.

On SR-91 Express Lanes in **Orange** County, Calif., tolls range from \$1.25 to \$10, depending on traffic. The average is \$3.13.

The HOT lane concept has already been a hot topic at the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority. In 2008, former Gov. Rod Blagojevich proposed the concept of high-occupancy "green lanes," but the plan was tainted by the "pay to play" scandal. Officials put the plan on hold after Blagojevich was ousted from office.

A 2007 report by the planning council estimated the Chicago region loses \$7.3 billion a year in wasted time, fuel and environmental damage. The report also found that Chicago-area drivers spend an average of 2 1/2 days stuck in traffic each year.

Truckers on the Illinois Tollway already use congestion pricing because they get a discount for traveling during off-peak hours.

Last year, Pace and the tollway teamed up in an unsuccessful bid for \$200 million in federal stimulus money to fund a plan to designate express bus and carpool lanes on the Tri-State Tollway.

Under the proposal, the inner lane in each direction would be intended for buses and carpools. Single-occupant motorists would be allowed to use the HOT lanes but would pay a premium toll, depending on the level of congestion.

In other cities, opponents have derided congestion pricing as "Lexus lanes" for well-to-do drivers.

But congestion pricing offers all drivers a choice, said Peter Skosey, a transportation expert at the planning council.

"In survey after survey, it's been shown that once these lanes are in place, people respond positively," Skosey said. "If they're in a hurry, they have the choice to [use them]. Surveys have also shown that users are not wealthy folks — it's a good mix of people. Folks of all means value their time."

The idea of imposing more tolls on area drivers will be a tough sell, some believe. Many still bristle at paying for an Illinois Tollway bureaucracy they consider self-perpetuating.

But DePaul's Schwieterman said, "Worsening financial problems have pushed our backs to a wall, so policymakers have an incentive to listen."

Experts say morning rush hour traffic is expected to increase by more than 12 percent over the next 20 years, and the region's economic competitiveness and quality of life are at risk unless innovative strategies are implemented.

In its draft comprehensive plan for the region, Go to 2040, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning sounded the call for congestion pricing.

The strategy is vital because the region's highway system can't match population growth and because state and federal governments can't be relied on for enough money for new roads, said Randy Blankenhorn, the agency's executive director.

New revenue is needed to maintain and build expressways. The study suggests that congestion-pricing the Kennedy's reversible lanes could provide more than \$23 million a year.

"Is everyone going to be happy with paying more? No," Blankenhorn said. "But money isn't going to continue to drop down on us from Springfield and **Washington**. ... Infrastructure is not free. We want to make it fair and user-based. Users should pay for the system."

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## Drive past congestion? It'll cost you

A new federally funded study lays out how congestion pricing could work on some of Chicagoland's most clogged expressways. The varying toll prices would give rush-hour drivers the option to buy their way past gridlock in a special lane. Congestion costs the region \$7.3 billion per year in fuel, environmental damage and wasted time. The concept is in practice in southern California and Minneapolis.



Figures are projected for 2020 during rush hour

#### 90 JANE ADDAMS TOLLWAY From Illinois 31 to the Tri-State Tollway (1-294) ☐ IL-31 to I-290 ■ I-290 to I-294 Projected fee Inbound Travel time (minutes) TOTAL Average speed (mph) for priced lane 59 10 69 Current system 012 ● 57.6 12 9 21 Priced lane 059 62 0 \$3.27 \$2.62 Toll lane 22.6 14 36.6 032 • 41 Outbound Current system 40 11 51 018 51 Priced lane 13 11 24 057 **5**5 0 \$2.06 \$2.91 15 16 Toll lane 31 048 37 90 94 KENNEDY EXPRESSWAY From I-94 to Ohio Street ☐ California Avenue to Ohio Street □ I-94 to California Avenue Projected fee TOTAL Travel time (minutes) Average speed (mph) Inbound for priced lane Current system 7 18 028.3 021.2 Priced lane 4 9 053 044 0 \$1.05 0 \$1.14 Free lane 8 025.5 019 20 Outbound 9 Current system 20 023.5 020 Priced lane 4 8.5 055 051 0 \$1.05 0 \$1.14 Free lane 10 23 021.2 018 55 STEVENSON EXPRESSWAY From I-355 to downtown Chicago ■ I-355 to I-294 ■ I-294 to Cicero Avenue ☐ Cicero Avenue to I-90/94 Projected fee Inbound TOTAL Travel time (minutes) Average speed (mph) for priced lane Current system 12 12 23 47 042 **45** 015 \$1.40 9 \$2.28 Priced lane 9 10 6 25 055 055 55 0 \$1.71 Free lane 10 11.6 9 30.6 048 **47** 038 Outbound 11 12 Current system 14 37 043 **47** 024 0 \$1.65 Priced lane 9 10 6 25 0.55 55 055 \$1.37 0 \$1.42 9.6 12 051 • 46 042 Free lane 29.6